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**survey of  
families with children  
living in  
shared accommodation**

In the area bounded by Burrard Street, Broadway, Commercial Drive and Burrard Inlet

(159)

VANCOUVER HOUSING ASSOCIATION

616 PROVINCE BUILDING, VAN., B.C.

M A Y

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## SURVEY OF FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN LIVING IN SHARED ACCOMMODATION

In the area bounded by Burrard St., Broadway, Commercial Drive, and Burrard Inlet

A field survey of families with children under 18, living in shared accommodation in the area bounded by Burrard St., Broadway, Commercial Drive and Burrard Inlet, was commenced by the Vancouver Housing Association in the winter of 1952. Owing to shortage of personnel, field work had to be discontinued until the fall and winter of 1953, when the survey was brought to completion.

The Association's thanks are due to Mrs. Leslie Weese, a qualified property manager, for extensive assistance given on a voluntary basis, and to Mrs. Alice MacDonald, the Association's Secretary, who carried out much of the field work.

### PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE SURVEY

The principal purposes of the survey were (1) to determine the approximate number of families with children living in a type of accommodation and in an environment which, generally speaking, afford unsatisfactory conditions for family living (2) to assess the actual conditions in which these families were living, and (3) to determine the type of housing they would require and the level of rents they can afford to pay, if they are to be rehoused.

All buildings in the area recorded on the Fire Insurance Underwriters maps as rooming houses or hotels, other than licenced premises, were visited and also any other buildings which appeared from visual inspection to be operated as lodging houses. No self-contained accommodation was included in the survey. Shared accommodation includes all accommodation in which either bathroom or kitchen facilities are shared with other persons or families.

The number of families covered by the survey totalled 138. Families of lodging house operators or owners were excluded. The surveyors were necessarily largely dependent on information supplied by the operators as to whether there were families with children living in the building, but it is not believed that there were many families unreported. A limited number of families could not be contacted and there must be a number of families living in shared accommodation in individual houses which were not covered by the survey, but, after taking these additional families into account, it appears improbable that the total number of families with children living in lodging house accommodation in the area can much exceed 200.

### The Outward Trend

Considering the size of the area and the density of population, (approximately 45,000 persons live in the area) the figures are encouraging, and, while no comparable statistics are available, there has unquestionably been a marked reduction in the number of families living in this type of accommodation since the years of acute housing shortage following the war. From the Downtown area in particular, there has been an almost total exodus of families with children, other than those of lodging house operators.

There is evidence, however, that a large number of families have moved to substandard housing in the outer districts, where cheap accommodation in the shape of basement suites and housekeeping rooms has become available through the spread of multiple occupancy uses and the illegal conversion of single family homes.

It should be remembered too, in assessing the general housing situation, that the survey did not cover families with children living in self-contained accommodation in the area, much of which is substandard.

### THE STATISTICAL PICTURE

A statistical analysis of the families covered by the survey is given at the back of this report. While the strict accuracy of all the figures cannot be guaranteed, since they are largely based on the verbal statements of the families surveyed, it is believed that, in the aggregate, they present a fair picture of conditions in this area. The salient points brought out by these statistics are given below:

#### Family Composition

The great majority of families were normal husband and wife families, but there was a relatively high proportion of broken families (27%), in which a woman was the head of the family. This was to be expected since, with their very low incomes, these families normally gravitate to the poorest accommodation.

The average number of children per family was 1.8. Slightly over half the families had only one child, while 7% had four or more children.

Some 10% of the families were Oriental, with a sprinkling of Negroes in the Main Street section. This figure excludes, of course, the considerable number of Chinese lodging house operators who were not included in the survey.

#### Crowding

The average size of family was 3.6 persons, and they occupied an average of 2.5 rooms, or not far short of  $1\frac{1}{2}$  persons per room. The Census Standard of crowding is one person per room. 11% of families occupied only one room for all living purposes. When it is remembered that the majority of these rooms are small and serve as kitchen, living and utility room, and in many cases as a bedroom as well, the degree of crowding will be better appreciated.

Some typical examples are given below:

Husband and wife and two young children occupy one room, paying \$32 a month.

Woman with three teen-age daughters and a boy of ten occupy three rooms. There is no sink on their floor. The bath and toilet are shared by 16 people. Rent \$65 a month.

Woman and son, aged 14, occupy one room, under 100 square feet in area. Rent \$39 a month.



Three families with three, three, and four children respectively, each live in two rooms in a tenement, sharing one sink on a dark landing and one bath with eight other suites. Building reported as damp and verminous.

Three adults and three children, aged 1 - 14, occupy three rooms in a tenement.

Husband and wife and two small children occupy one room, sharing one bath and two toilets with about 19 other rooms. Rent \$44 a month.

Husband and wife and two daughters, aged 15 and 17, occupy two rooms divided by a partition. They have no private sink and share one bath and two toilets with about 15 other roomers.

Husband and wife and three young children occupy two rooms, one of which is unventilated, rent \$40 a month without heat. They have no private sink and share one bath with ten other rooms.

The effect on family life of living at such close quarters, particularly where there are no recreational facilities outside the home, needs no emphasis. The frictions involved in the common use of essential plumbing facilities by large numbers of persons with varying personal habits, particularly where children are involved, is another obvious source of stress and strain for the housewife.

#### Plumbing, cooking, and heating facilities

While four out of five families had their own sink, the common bathroom was, as often as not, shared by anything from 10 to 20 persons. 10% of the families did not have the use of a bath or shower at all. Complaints were fairly frequent of the inability to get hot water in adequate quantities or except during limited periods. In a large number of cases the tenants had to heat what water they required on their own stove. The problem was aggravated by the fact that the bathroom frequently had to serve for laundry purposes as well.

Cooking was done in nearly equal proportions on a wood and coal stove and on gas, with some families using both. In a number of cases cooking facilities were limited to a gas plate. Only one instance of cooking by electricity was reported. Since a number of the kitchens must also be used for sleeping purposes, some families will be affected by the new Gas By-Law.

Although a ventilated cooler is now required by By-law in all housekeeping rooms, the number reporting this facility was negligible, but about one quarter of the families had their own refrigerator or ice box. Economical housekeeping on low incomes is not made easier when food storage is limited to an unventilated cupboard or a window soap box.

60% of the suites surveyed were heated by individual wood and coal or sawdust stoves. Only 27% enjoyed central heating. A few were heated by a gas plate only. A number of the women complained of the burden of carrying their fuel up one or more flights of stairs.

The great majority of the rooming houses in the area under survey are old buildings of frame construction with electric wiring which would not conform to present-day By-law standards. With so many rooms heated individually by stoves and with gas cooking in livingrooms, the risk of fire must be very real, and once a fire started

most of these buildings would be gutted very quickly. The danger appears to be particularly great in the older two and three storey tenements to the south of False Creek which unfortunately contain a high proportion of children.

### Play Space

One of the worst features of the area under survey is the almost total lack of private or public playspace for smaller children. Less than a quarter of the families had the use either of a back yard or a public playground within a quarter mile of their home. This means that the mother has the alternative of either keeping her children cooped up in one or two rooms during most of the day or of taking the chance of allowing them to play on the heavy traffic streets which characterize this area. The general environment of much of the area leaves a good deal to be desired in other respects also, so far as children are concerned.

### Tenancy Turnover

One of the most notable points brought out by the survey was the high rate of tenancy turnover; over half the families surveyed had lived less than two years in their present quarters and over a third had moved in the last year. It was not uncommon to find families with low incomes who had moved anything from six to twelve times in the previous five years, moving from one condemned building to another, which would itself be condemned or pulled down in due course. Any attempts to make a real home for children or to establish contacts with the community under such circumstances must be very difficult indeed.

Over 10% of the families had moved to their present quarters from buildings which had been condemned or demolished to make way for business. This is at least satisfactory evidence that some of our worst housing is coming down, but this knowledge is cold comfort for the family displaced, unless better accommodation within their means is made available to them.

Most of the tenants appeared to regard their accommodation as a temporary make-shift until they could find something better. Only 15% expressed themselves as satisfied with their accommodation as a permanent home. Of the remaining 85%, the majority were anxious to move immediately if they could find better accommodation at a rent they could afford, while a limited number were satisfied to remain where they were until their employment or financial situation was clearer. These figures should help to dispose of the myth that people live in slums because they like it. When asked why they had chosen to rent their present accommodation, the most frequent reply was "it was the only place we could find which would take children". The principal other reasons given were (1) because the rent was reasonable (2) because it was close to the husband's work or their children's school.

### Housing Requirements

The primary housing requirements expressed by these families were (1) more room space (2) some place for their kids to play. The great majority therefore would prefer a house and most of those who wished to move appeared to have little preference for one district or another, provided it was reasonably accessible to the husband's work. There were, however, a number who, owing to the nature of their husband's work, e.g. stevedoring, wished to remain in the same neighbourhood.

Under 10% expected to be financially able to buy their own home within the next year or so.

### Rents paid

The average rent paid by the families surveyed was \$31 a month. Just over half the accommodation was furnished or partly furnished. The average rent of the furnished accommodation was \$35, unfurnished \$27 a month. Only 35% of the rents included heating; 27% included gas, but the majority included electricity. The average rent for single rooms (\$34 a month) was actually higher than the average for suites of two or more rooms. This can be accounted for by the fact that most of the single rooms consisted of accommodation in the downtown districts, often with central heating, in which the family was staying temporarily until they could find something cheaper or more suitable.

Rents in general appeared to be related as much to the tenant's ability to pay or to the landlord's desire to get the biggest return from his property as to the quality of accommodation provided. While the situation has eased somewhat in recent years, very few vacancies were noted and so long as poor housing can find a tenant no matter how inferior it may be, it will retain a scarcity value out of proportion to its real value in relation to better accommodation. This is particularly true of accommodation rented to families with children, since very few rooming houses will accept children and, generally speaking, the only accommodation made available to this group is that which does not rent readily owing to its inferior quality.

All the accommodation surveyed, being shared accommodation, was subject to rent control. Where the rent seemed out of line, there was little evidence of tenants having checked to see if it was in conformity with the controlled rent. The fact that a landlord can give six month's notice to tenants occupying this class of accommodation would no doubt discourage tenants from taking advantage of the regulations in order to have their rents reduced.

### Incomes

Tenants were asked in what income bracket they fell and nearly two-thirds replied.

16% had incomes under \$1000  
 25% had incomes between \$1000 and \$1500  
 24% had incomes between \$1500 and \$2500  
 19% had incomes between \$2500 and \$3000  
 16% had incomes over \$3000.

Incomes would probably tend, if anything, to be understated. A number of those who did not report their incomes either had irregular earnings or were temporarily unemployed. On the basis of the above figures, one can estimate very roughly that better than one-third could afford a shelter rent of \$40 a month or more, and that a further quarter could afford between \$30 and \$40 a month. The remaining 40% are at or near the subsistence level, and their chances of getting even reasonably decent accommodation are very poor indeed, unless there is a substantial increase in the quantity of moderate rental housing, which would help them indirectly by relieving the pressure on the cheapest accommodation.



### Families in receipt of Social Allowances

Some 16% of the families surveyed were in receipt of Social Allowances and a further small percentage were dependent on a small pension of one sort or another. Rents paid by this group were often out of all proportion to their income, as the following figures will show:

FAMILY	SOCIAL & FAMILY ALLOWANCES	RENT PAID
Woman & child	\$67.50	\$30 (excl. heat)
Woman & child of 10	69.50	\$34 (for one room)
Woman & child	67.50	\$30
Woman & 2 children	84.50	\$38
Woman & 1 child	67.50	\$38
War Pensioner, wife & 2 teenage children	108.50	\$50

In one or two cases the above allowances may have been supplemented by the City, but the net income available for the necessities of life of such families must be meager, to say the least. There is little encouragement for women living in such circumstances to keep to the straight and narrow path.

With the proposed increase in Social Allowances, the financial position of some of this group will be appreciably improved and there appears every justification for accepting a proportion of families on Social Allowance in the Little Mountain Housing Project, even though their income is below the present accepted minimum, provided the City undertakes to make up their rents in those cases where the rental allowance falls short of the minimum rents for the project.

### Occupations

A good majority of the male family heads were skilled workers or apprentices. Of the less skilled occupations, laborers, stavedores, truck drivers and loggers were the most numerous, in that order. About 5% were reported unemployed at the time of the survey, but there may well have been others unreported. A further 8% of the men were unemployable or on some sort of pension. From the above figures it will be seen that a good majority of the families covered by the survey are normal, working families who have been forced to accept their present accommodation simply because there was no other accommodation where children were accepted at rents they could afford to pay.

### Condition of Buildings

Since the object of the survey was the family rather than the house, no detailed check was made of the buildings visited, except in so far as their condition affected the families living in them.

The conditions of the buildings and the quality of the management naturally varied widely with the district and the type of building. It is only fair to

mention however, that the standard type of lodging house found in large numbers in the northern sector of the survey area and managed largely by Chinese operators, although usually old, dark, poorly planned and lacking in adequate plumbing facilities, are, in general, well maintained and clean.

### The Future of the Area

The future of much of the area under survey is today in doubt. Owing to haphazard and inconsistent zoning policies in the past, the intermingling of industrial and residential uses has created conditions equally unsatisfactory to either use, with their inevitable byproduct of slums and blight.

It is not too late, however, to remedy the situation and such action is becoming a matter of urgency. In the area east of Main St., north of the False Creek flats, in particular, there is a heavy investment in schools, churches, community buildings, etc., and it is important that definite decisions on the future zoning of these areas should be taken before additional investments are made and before further unsuitable development renders the cost of redevelopment prohibitive.

It is to be hoped therefore that the City Planning Department will shortly carry out a detailed study of the areas in question and formulate long term plans for their redevelopment and for the rehousing, where necessary, of the large population at present living in this area.

### CONCLUSION

There is one general conclusion to be drawn from the survey, and that is this: the great bulk of accommodation covered by the survey is unsuitable for family living whether by reason of inadequacies in the buildings themselves or because of environmental factors. Many of the buildings should come down in any case within the next few years to make way for other uses.

All but a few of the families living in this accommodation would benefit from better accommodation if it were available and the majority could pay rents around the average at present set for public housing.

The community therefore has an obligation to see that these families, and the many other families living in similar conditions in other parts of the city, are enabled to rent decent accommodation within their means, since very few of them can afford to buy a house of their own.

Little Mountain is a start in this direction, but more moderate and low rental housing will have to be provided, whether by public authorities or by private limited dividend corporations, before all families with children can be moved from the slums in which too many are living today.

Such housing should form part of a larger program of urban redevelopment through the elimination of obsolete housing in the central areas and its replacement by industry and commerce, or by new housing.



		Percentage of Total
No. of families visited	138	100
Total no. of persons in families	501	
Average no. of persons per family	3.6	
No. of husband & wife families	99	71
No. of families with woman head	37	27
Other families	2	2
No. of families with one child	70	51
" " " " two children	42	31
" " " " three children	16	11
" " " " four children	7	5
" " " " four or more children	3	2
Total no. of children	251	
Average no. of children per family	1.8	
No. of one room suites	15	11
No. of two room suites	62	45
No. of three room suites	36	26
No. of four room suites or over	25	18
Total no. of rooms occupied	351	
Average no. of rooms per family	2.5	
No. of furnished or part furnished suites	66	
No. of unfurnished suites	67	
Average rent per suite	\$31	
furnished suites	\$35	
unfurnished suites	\$27	
one room suites	\$34	
No. of suites in which rent includes electricity	91	64
gas	38	27
heat	48	35
No. of suites with:		
own sink	110	80
wood, coal, or sawdust range	61	45
wood and coal and gas cooker	14	10
gas range or plate	56	41
oil range	4	3
electric plate	1	1
No. of suites heated by:		
wood or coal stove in suite	83	63
central heating	38	28
oil stove in suite	7	5
gas fire or plate in suite	6	4
No. of suites where:		
bath is shared by 9 or more persons	66	47
there are no bathing facilities	13	10
toilet is shared by 9 or more persons	41	30

No. of suites with:

ventilated cooler	4	)
refrigerator	21	)25
ice box	13	)
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No. of families with access to play space for small children	31	22
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No. of tenancies of under one year	49	35
" " " " one to two years	38	20
" " " " two to five years	36	27
" " " " over five years	24	18
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No. of families wishing to move now or later	104	85
" " " " satisfied with present accommodation	19	15
" " " " expecting to buy a house within next year or two	12	9
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No. of families reporting incomes of		
under \$1000 a year	15	16
\$1000 - \$1500	23	25
\$1500 - \$2000	8	9
\$2000 - \$2500	14	15
\$2500 - \$3000	17	19
over \$3000	15	16
income unreported	46	
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Note When the figures in any classification do not add up to the total number of families or suites covered by the survey, information is lacking on those not recorded.